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Authoritarianism and the Pandemic: Activities of Rights-based organisations in Turkey

Ekin İlke Keleşoğlu

Introduction

- 1 Apart from COVID-19 and its effects on physical and mental health, there is also much to mention in diverse regard, particularly in the pandemic's sociopolitical effects. In this article, we will focus on the pandemic's effects on unconventional political participation and more particularly on the activities of the rights-based organisations in contemporary Turkey. Firstly, authoritarianism discussions will be mentioned with regard to political participation and democracy in the context of contemporary Turkey, in order to shape the conceptual and theoretical framework of this piece. Following this, recent discussion on shrinking civic space in contemporary Turkey and the activities of rights-based institutions will briefly be presented with a particular focus on pre-pandemic and post-pandemic phases. Taking a closer look on the effects of the COVID-19, in addition to a study of literature and examination of the primary sources, our research is mainly based on eight in-depth interviews in total, four of them held before the announcement of the pandemic in February 2020 and the remainder were realised more recently in September 2020. This article aims to contribute to the studies on pandemic and authoritarianism in the context of contemporary Turkish studies.

Political participation vs. Pandemic: Increase of Authoritarian Policies

- 2 Conceptualised by Kaase and Marsh, who divided the concept of political participation into conventional and unconventional participation. Political participation was defined as 'all voluntary activities intended to influence political choices either directly or

indirectly at various levels of the political system'¹. While conventional political participation could be briefly described as voting and related official and/or legal activities, the latter is defined

as a means of political repression, namely, (...) the use of tactics such as petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, rents or tax strikes, unofficial industrial strikes, occupations of buildings, blockage of traffic, property and personal violence².

- 3 Political participation is a right and responsibility recognised by all states in the concept of civil rights. Although the official forms of political participation vary with some nuances, it has essentially formed itself on the mechanism of representation by voting. While social scientists draw attention to the weaknesses in modern democracy in terms of less inclusive decision-making processes and autocratic tendencies under neoliberal priorities, Turkey also remains as one of the examples worth studying in regard to the detection of the characteristics of how the modern tools of political participation can occur as the roots of shrinking active participation. As Loïc Blondiaux affirms, contemporary democracies are looking for a new spirit, new foundations. Classical forms of political representation survive, but their legitimacy is diminishing and their effectiveness is declining.³ With regard to the inadequacies of contemporary democracy, unconventional forms of political participation are increasing and diversifying in all around the world, particularly in street demonstrations, social media campaigns, petitions etc. Democratic societies are today confronted with new challenges which they are ill-prepared to answer because they are unable to grasp the nature of the political and come to terms with the paradox which is at the core of modern liberal democracy.⁴ The Yellow Jacket movement in France and Black Lives Matter in the US. constitute recent examples of massive social demonstrations, while alternative initiatives and social groups gather actually or virtually in different countries against the policies under autocratic leaderships.
- 4 While unconventional forms of political participation are not defined by the political system as an official method, they affect, and sometimes modify to a certain extent, decision-makers' policies and practices. Despite the fact that such forms of political participation are not illegal and are therefore protected by the constitutional law particularly in scope of the fundamental rights and freedoms, we have witnessed that they can be subject to judicial sanctions which create further concerns regarding the present and future of democracy in Turkey. In this context, however; activists, human right defenders, feminists, labour organizations and other different social groups have been continuing to their activities in some way, even in a shrinking civic space.
- 5 After the COVID-19 pandemic declaration made by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11th March 2020, the current political atmosphere was affected in the rest of the world in an unprecedented way. This is to say, governments gained an automatic and less-questionable sphere to their immediate political acts and rules. Basically, the response to COVID-19 has relied upon certain levels of coercion: curfews, smart-phone based individual tracking apps, judicial sanctions etc. While such pandemic-related sanctions are already subject to critics and objections in terms of individual freedoms, there are increasing voices alerting the government use of the pandemic as an excuse to restrict freedoms as it was underlined by the Freedom House report *Democracy Under Lockdown: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom*⁵. Officials and security services perpetrated violence against civilians, detained people without justification, and overstepped their legal authority. Governments are also using the pandemic as a

justification to grant themselves special powers beyond what is reasonably necessary to protect public health. They have then exploited these emergency powers to interfere in the justice system, impose unprecedented restrictions on political opponents, and undermine crucial legislative functions.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic appears to be, at least in the short term, a fertile ground for the erosion of democratic principles, as public opinion appears to be relatively willing to accept a technocratic or authoritarian turn.⁷ In parallel to these recent discussions, Giorgio Agamben, in the article published late February 2020 in the Italian journal *Quodlibet*, titled 'The invention of an epidemic'⁸ asks the question of why the media and the authorities are working hand in hand to spread a climate of panic, causing a real state of exception, with serious limitations on movement and a suspension of the normal functioning of living and working conditions in entire regions. Agamben affirms that two factors can explain disproportionate behaviour of governments: First, there is once again the growing tendency to use the state of exception⁹ as a normal paradigm of government. The other factor, Agamben singles out is that the state of fear which in recent years has evidently spread in the consciousness of individuals and which translates into a real state of collective panic.¹⁰ Even though this short piece of work was criticised by certain political scientists with regard to Agamben's underestimation towards COVID-19, the idea is valid in itself: COVID-19 has been affecting and aggravating the already-existing problems on social, political and economic levels in terms of liberties and democracy.

- 6 Considering that the virus is highly contagious and can be transmitted so easily, social restrictions might be seen justifiable in the face of the pandemic to some extent. Still, the risk finds voice that governments tend to abuse this crisis to enact measures that are disproportionate, extend their powers and limit freedoms permanently.¹¹ Similar concerns were also expressed for the Erdoğan presidency and current political atmosphere in Turkey. Detention of journalists, police brutality, a ban on protest demonstrations, detention of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – HDP) MPs, social media arrests, dismissals of elected local mayors and appointment of a trustee in the Kurdish region and so on... These developments have continued to take place while opposition groups were already experiencing repressive policies in contemporary Turkey. Apart from the concerns these practices create in terms of human rights and democracy, it is also worth examining in two dimensions: First, in Gramscian terms, Erdoğan's government remains a non-hegemonic rule, as it applies coercion continuously without applying consent, especially in recent years. As Yeşim Arat and Şevket Pamuk mention, although Erdoğan has succeeded in establishing a loyal constituency despite – and perhaps because of – his increasingly repressive rule, he has not established hegemony, as approximately half of the population continues to oppose his rule¹² and some of them are facing the coercive elements particularly the ones who are involved in unconventional political participation activities, such as human rights defenders and other social opposition groups. The second one is basically that COVID-19 did not have a visible effect on downgrading the coercive policies that Turkey had been experiencing before the pandemic, while most of the unconventional forms of political participation such as street demonstrations, civic engagement activities, and gatherings were dramatically affected in comparison. In the following paragraphs, the activities of rights-based organisations will be examined in the light of the news published in visual and written media as well as the pre- and post-pandemic in-depth interviews.

Social opposition and rights-based activities during COVID-19

- 7 The content of this chapter is mainly based on the pre- and post-pandemic in-depth interviews which were carried out with members of four organisations, namely the Education and Science Workers' Union Universities Branch¹³ (hereafter *Eğitim-Sen*), the Diyarbakır Bar Women's Rights Centre, the Human Rights Association Headquarters, and the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (hereafter *Mor Çatı*) who are active separately in the fields of women's rights, labour rights and human rights. In order to gain a better understanding on how COVID-19 affected the activities of rights-based organizations, we will benefit from the comparative approach. The interviewees were asked to share their insights to following questions:

What is the main activity of your organisation? Could you talk about the major policy influencing activities of your institution so far?

- 8 The main question for examining the effects of COVID-19 during the post-pandemic interviews those held in September 2020:

In what wa(s) did COVID-19 affect your activities?

- 9 These organisations were selected for this study because they are four of the most active ones in terms of having a radical political perspective in their fields of activity, being in existence and developing policies despite the shrinking civic space. Also, with regard to their types of activity, these organisations constitute good examples in practicing various forms of unconventional political participation along with the others, which we did not have the chance to include in this piece because of the COVID-19 related communication issues. As will be presented in the coming paragraphs in detail, the main common point of these four organisations is their significant concern on influencing local and national policies in their fields of activity both in the pre- and post-pandemic processes.

COVID-19 and women's organisations: Mor Çatı and Diyarbakır Bar Women's Rights Centre

- 10 COVID-19 has negatively affected the women in Turkey as feminist organisations pay attention to the fact that the number of cases of violence against women and femicide are increasing. In order to have a better understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on women's rights, we have conducted four interviews with the members of Mor Çatı and Diyarbakır Bar Women's Rights Centre.
- 11 Diyarbakır Bar Women's Rights Centre, one of the most important local women's centres, is an organisation which produces policy-influencing work, mostly in internal terms but externally as well. With regard to its internal activities, mainstreaming gender equality within the Diyarbakır Bar Association, including equal representation in the administration. External, because the centre is actually working as a women's organisation composed of the women who aim to push the women's struggle in the field into the juristic sphere. COVID-19 has also affected the centre's activities, for example, since the trial processes were suspended because of the COVID-19, the women whose divorce proceedings were still continuing had problems, affirms Interviewee-1.

Fig. 1: Thousands of lawyers attended the Defence Meeting held in Çağlayan Courthouse to protest the plans of bar associations to change their structure on 23 June 2020



Hürriyet

- 12 One of the main agendas in the post-pandemic process in contemporary Turkish politics, was that a new multiple bar system was approved by the Turkey's parliament which created further concerns on judicial independence (Fig. 1). The multiple bar system which politicises the bar organisations was criticised by Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists, as it divides the legal profession along political lines and diminishes the largest bar associations' role as human rights watchdogs¹⁴ Interviewee-1 considers this development with a focus on women's rights angle and points out the budget issue:

When it comes to the division of bar associations, it will actually mean the disappearance of the internal centres. If the budget for the association is divided, with which budget will the centres continue their activities?

- 13 Since the women's center is working particularly with the judicial processes of women's rights violations, the interviews held with Interviewee-2 who works voluntarily and professionally in the Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation (Mor Çatı), gave several insights on a variety of ways COVID-19 has effects on women. Mor Çatı, as one of the oldest and pioneer feminist organisations in contemporary Turkey is concurrently carrying on multiple activities: managing the solidarity center, coordinating the women's shelter, and carrying on policy-influencing activities as well as producing feminist policy. During our first interview on 17th of February, Interviewee-2 mentioned numerous activities that they were carrying on in terms of unconventional political participation: publishing policy reports in cooperation with other women's organisations, producing petitions, publishing reactive declarations against rights violations, issuing monthly bulletins, publications and guides, platform memberships and so on. Above all, Interviewee-2 emphasises the importance of street demonstrations as part of these activities, including the marches organised for two important days 8th March, International Women's Day and 25th November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: After the murder of 27-year-old university student Pinar Gültekin, women took to the streets in many cities to protest violence against women, on 21 July 2020



Gazete Karınca

Our reality of appearing in the streets has been continuing despite all the repressive policies. We go out with our independent feminist identity; we pursue the performance our feminist political line in the streets persistently. 8 March, 25 November... We go out to the streets sometimes for the events that we need to react immediately. Going out in the streets is still one of the most-used methods as feminists.

- 14 Since COVID-19, Mor Çatı's activities were affected to a lesser degree in comparison to other interviewed organisations. Two main effects were experienced according to Interviewee-2: First, all of the in-person activities such as workshops, conferences, gatherings, congresses etc. were transferred into online platforms which caused some communication difficulties along with its positive sides with regard to being accessible to anyone who has internet. "However, the feedback we received from both the meetings and the participants shows us that it does not have the same effect as being face to face." Secondly, street demonstrations and in-place press releases became harder after COVID-19 because of the measures taken.

Syndical Rights of University personnel and Academics: Eğitim-Sen Universities Branch

- 15 Turkey's education union, Eğitim-Sen was founded in 1995 and is the pioneer union for education workers including teachers, academics and administrative personnel in educational institutions. Eğitim-Sen Universities Branch, based in Istanbul mainly protects the labor rights of academic and administrative staff in the universities. Apart from the syndicalist nature and facilities such as the struggle against the precarious employment of university assistants and unlawful situations faced by academic / administrative staff, Eğitim-Sen speaks on Turkey's general political situation as well as state politics towards universities. Interviewee-3 states,

Based on our pre-pandemic interview, it was understood that the *Academics for Peace cases*¹⁵ has constituted the union's main activity field in terms of developing

solidarity networks, national and international diplomacy as well as organising press releases.

When you look at it recently, this peace academics case... this is an occasion where we talk about the Turkish politics. Because at the very beginning, half of these signatories - I think they are so - are our members. There is also a significant number in our branch... In the Academics for Peace lawsuits, Eğitim-Sen helped establish the political aspect of this issue with the other initiatives. Follow-up of the lawsuits, press releases etc.

- 16 Along with the press releases and establishing follow-up groups for the lawsuits, the unions' natural policy-influencing tools such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations etc. were also being experienced before the pandemic. The pandemic has affected all of these activities to a certain extent but has also engendered new activity areas. As the union was closed until mid-June, the first thing that the headquarters did reflexively was to collect data and daily records of the rights violations in the COVID-19 process. As a brief summary based on the statements of Interviewee-3, rights violations continued in the COVID-19 process, working conditions of academic and administrative staff were more difficult. With regard to social distancing and other related restrictions, online tools were applied more often which shrinks the activity space of a labour organisation.

Defending human rights in times of COVID-19: Human Rights Association

- 17 İnsan Hakları Derneği / *Human Rights Association* (HRA) which is the oldest and most influential human rights organisation in Turkey, basically aims to protect human rights and approaches the social, economic, political, and cultural rights as its principles, and also is a part of national and international human rights and democracy platform. Based on the interviews that were realised in February 2020, HRA was represented by Interviewee-4, who is one of the executives, as an organisation that defends that the struggle for human rights and democracy is an inseparable whole. HRA has relations with social opposition organisations and political parties, and with the government in terms of carrying on the negotiations. The main policy-influencing methods and tools adopted by the HRA are; documenting and reporting human rights violations, taking action and activity to raise awareness, social media campaigns, press releases, operating processes for seeking justice, negotiation and dialogue, lobbying, fact-based reporting and diplomatic activity. Interviewee-4 states that when it comes to the Kurdish question the situation changes:

While we deal with the violations in the context of the Kurdish question, it causes state institutions to take different initiatives against us. On the other hand, a stance is taken to prevent the activities of the activists and HRA executives by swinging like a sword over the judicial pressure. The government, which is ready to cooperate at some points, puts the pressure policy into effect in order to prevent that cooperation if the Kurdish question is the case.

- 18 HRA uses numerous methods in terms of unconventional political participation, also with its thirty different branches and centres throughout Turkey and the organisational structure and capability allows to carry on its activities extensively. Since the pandemic, the HRA headquarters remains open while most of the branches have transferred their working system online. As cited by Interviewee-4,

The measures taken after the pandemic started to limit or prevent many activities. For example, preparing reports by examining violations on the spot, have suffered

because of the intercity travel ban. Also, pandemics caused a dramatic rise in human rights violation applications received from the prisons from all around Turkey.

The government has used the COVID-19 environment in its favour. Before COVID-19, we might have been able to do more street demonstrations and events. The government banned this, but as far as itself is concerned, we see a political atmosphere where the COVID-19 is used against the social opposition. You have to show a democratic reaction against it on the street, and this time we are faced with prohibitions very intensely.

- 19 Indeed, while rights-based organisations' demands in the form of demonstration are prohibited by the government on the pretext of social distancing rules, Erdoğan organised mass gatherings and demonstrations in the same period, as it was observed in Giresun public meetings where he handed out tea packages to the masses, which caused small-scale confluence among the population (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: During the speech of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressing the citizens in Giresun's Dereli district, it was observed that the social distancing rules were not followed, 31 August 2020



BirGün

Conclusion

- 20 COVID-19 has affected the activities of the rights-based organisations to some extent. However, publishing reports and policy papers, press releases, small-scale demonstrations, field works, social media campaigns have remained similar to the pre-pandemic period, while street demonstrations and in person meetings were interrupted. Online tools started to be accepted by the organisations as it has become almost the only alternative to gather with the others.
- 21 In this piece, the objective was to examine the COVID-19 effects on rights-based organisations by referring to the discussions on the existing authoritarianism in Turkey during the pandemic, based on the in-depth interview method. Agamben's affirmation on the government's use of COVID-19 as an excuse to suppress social opposition, was correlative of the in-depth interview notes. In July especially, when the government transformed Hagia Sophia into a mosque and the first public Friday prayer was performed, many COVID-19 restrictions were violated while neither ban nor police

intervention took place. This was apparently not the case when feminists gathered for protesting the femicides or when human rights defenders gathered for protesting the human rights violations in Turkey, as many of the protestors were taken into custody.

- 22 The sudden appearance of COVID-19, on the other hand, has deepened and complicated existing concerns regarding the paradoxes of political participation, as well as the concerns on authoritarian rules. In Gramscian terms, the ongoing activities of rights-based organisations show that Erdoğan's rule – despite all the coercive elements – reaches a deadlock when it comes to ensuring a certain extent of consent among social opposition groups. Apart from state behaviours and practices, the COVID-19 effects, in the context of social opposition organisations and rights-based activities, can be considered in two specificities. First, we are observing a civil society which is adapting itself to existing authoritarian policies by finding new ways or insisting to express rights-demands, and on the other hand, the space for action has narrowed because of the COVID-19-related restrictions. However, this shrinkage is among the possibilities that it may lead to the opening of de-localisation due to its potential to contain itself. As a matter of fact, the disappearance of distances through alternative media and online tools in the COVID-19 process, may lead to a more organised form of radical demands for democracy and active civic participation in the future.

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13. The official name of the branch is *Eğitim-Sen 6. Branch*, since all of the members of this branch are administrative or academic personnel of universities, the expression of “universities branch” is being used more often.
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15. Academics for Peace is a group that unites more than 2,000 individuals supporting peace in the south-east of Turkey. They are among the 1,128 signatories of a petition released in January 2016 calling for an end to violence in the region. In July 2019, the Plenary Session of the Constitutional Court has ruled that freedom of expression was violated in the sentencing of the peace academics accused of ‘making armed terrorist organization propaganda’ for having signed the peace declaration. [16 October 2020] www.frontlinedefenders.org.

ABSTRACTS

In this article, the examination of authoritarianism and the effects of COVID-19 in the times of the pandemic on rights-based organisations in Turkey were studied. In parallel with critical political scientists such as Loïc Blondiaux, Chantal Mouffe and Giorgio Agamben, this article supports the view that the limited instruments that modern democracy provides create a need for more effective political participation forms, which we deal with the concept of 'unconventional political participation' in this study. Accordingly, we approach COVID-19 as an unprecedented challenge for the rights demands of social opposition groups in addition to the existing problems in Turkey. The field research which was held in scope of this study reveals that COVID-19 has undoubtedly affected the activities of rights-based organisations to a certain extent, while their activities are being oriented to the 'new normal' in terms of the growing use of online tools, written statements and reports for policy-influencing as forms of unconventional political participation.

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Keywords: COVID-19, authoritarianism, political participation, rights-based organisations

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